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GRAPHIC DESIGN

PRACTICE & EDUCATION

DESIGNS



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Outside Institute

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Through my work at UCLA Extension, where I oversee design, photography and art programs, the issue of 'practical' and applied training versus research, experimental and theory training is an ongoing discussion, as I expect it is at most Universities. The 'practical' is often relegated to a less than lofty camp, often positioned by leading design schools to discussion of software, basic production, and career planning. Applied training occupies a hybrid area, mixing the use of practical knowledge, taught or untaught, with applied, or 'on the grid' training using the well-tested systems of design education shared by most institutions; studies of logos, letterforms, compositions, visual communication and more. Applied training may include research, experimentation and theory, but it is missing something important.

Curricula and class structures are made in concert with the University, Faculty and Students. The University must balance its fiscal responsibilities that require maintaining and increasing student enrolment, with academic goals they feel are paramount, lasting and compelling to multiple constituents. As the role of a graphic designer continues to expand in scope, the difficulty with identifying the best preparation for entering the field increases. The Faculty, many who run their own studios, are well versed in the pressures and requirements involved with building and maintaining a successful design business. With the goal in mind of preparing students for a seamless entry into the profession, they often adopt the applied 'on the grid' approach, as opposed to working in more experimental ways. With the limited time they have access to the students and the sheer volume of applied knowledge they must impart, this provides students with a taste of what they can expect when they begin working. Students, concerned with getting a job in such a competitive field, have a close alliance to classes that focus primarily on applied aspects of design such as designing logos, print production, and packaging.

Missing from this direction are some essential conversations to build a complete and integrated approach, looking at the process a student uses to understand information, absorb it, and apply it to 'make' design. Projects that emphasize more applied aspects of design often produce results that look professional but the internal creative potential of the student remains obfuscated, unexplored, and un-retrievable.

This lopsided approach can create stagnated grammars and leads to entropy, – as a safe road that leads to good, acceptable design. It reinforces bad habits that seem to result in good design, but ultimately leaves students insecure, holding tightly to ways of working that by all standard measures are successful. By focusing primarily on familiar practices, not only do we miss the chance to change the design output, but more importantly, we miss the opportunity to change the lives of each participant. Helping them to "see" visually rather than "recognize" imparts confidence and reinforces the unique symbiotic relationship between creativity and being human. It should be a goal of education to integrate course work that illuminates the design process, and its internal mechanisms, encouraging students to be creators rather than merely consumers.

Our challenge is to create a blend of experiences for students that combines the mastery of traditional professional skills with what I describe as the more lasting practice of design education, "making to see". This practice of design – the fine balance of aesthetics, knowledge, and visual training – is the juxtaposition between logic and intuition, hand skills and pixels, concept and results, commerce and culture. The ability to understand these juxtapositions is what encompasses our work. The results can be both subtle and powerful, drawing on the intimate, less verbal process to promote ideas that function and take root in a much larger world and context.

Ironically, the classes we are creating at UCLA Extension under the umbrella name of “Outside Institute” (O.I.) may appear less directly related to the design field, but by addressing these important concerns they become the most practical, applied classes a student can take. They deal with the fundamental grammars essential for achieving visual literacy. By making, students learn to see and restore their natural proclivity for curiosity. The lessons learned are what make a successful designer, commercially and otherwise. The projects described here are at the same time foundation classes, and the most advanced classes a student or working artist can take. Exploring new paradigms for design education include these focused studies on restoring the direct experience to the creative process, encouraging experimentation, invention, and imagination.

Learning How to See:

In 1959, Anni Albers wrote in her book **Annie Albers: On Designing**, *“Though only a few penetrate the screen that habits of thought and conduct form in their time, it is good for all of us to pause sometimes, to think, wonder, and maybe worry; to ask “where are we now?””*

Our inherent urge to create is one of the main instincts that unite us as human beings; a natural desire that is not automatically accomplished. As educators we can establish fertile conditions and develop assignments that allow students to fulfil their potential. Being creative, however, requires working within implied resistance and constraints: learning “how to see”. “Seeing” is a discipline essential achieving visual literacy through the direct experience of making. “See” has a second meaning that, while frequently used in conversation, is less familiar: to understand. The relationship between seeing and understanding is essential to creating visual connections and finding new sources of reference. Design serves as a means for a better understanding of the physical world within which we live and a better reading of the nature of the realities around us.

The subjects the Institute addresses, while relying on core visual thinking skills, are dissimilar to our traditional foundation courses, such as Design I, where students learn about the common punch lists that make for good design – understanding of color, composition, hierarchy, practices in production, and so forth. We want to develop and harness creative energy by taking designers into a series of interactions/intersections to exercise and challenge our form-making process, giving them the complimentary skills that speak to the core grammars for innovation. By exposing students to gifted teachers representing professions seemingly unrelated to design — Sociology, Dance, Music, Mathematics, etc. — they experience new and less familiar ways of working. The results can be both subtle and powerful, drawing on an intimate, less verbal process to promote ideas that function and take root in a much larger world.

Seeing How to Learn:

In the words of Susan Sontag from her essay *Against Interpretation*, *“What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more.”*

Outline of the Program:

The Approach:

The Outside Institute (O.I.) has just begun with a series of programs at UCLA Extension. In general, we are talking about a place (laboratory) for observation and analysis that can be at least an inch wide and always a mile or more deep. **Our objective is to take students 'off the grid' and get them into an environment that has no 'practical' outcome, to find ways to let the discovery process happen while making the projects be the thing the students are thinking about, questioning, and experimenting with.** The final product becomes incidental to the process, yet we intend to use the lessons learned from the process and appropriate collaboration with others in the environment for staggeringly practical outcomes, when later applied back to the 'on the grid' world of client and traditional class projects. The institute itself is an experiment for the University, it is the expectation that we too will learn from the experience, and the information received will appropriately be re-integrated to future O.I. experiences, and most importantly, serves as an opportunity to inform and revise existing design dogmas.

Our goal from the beginning has been to see the Institute as an adjunct to the existing program, which mirrors many of the excellent programs in the United States and Internationally. We see the movement of students off the grid as an ingredient, not a replacement of tradition design studies. By separating the institute from the traditional program, in terms of class duration, location, types of professors, and types of projects, we are looking to create an environment where they are more open to experimentation, questioning, and self discovery.

The Guiding Goals of this Approach:

- A series of experiences with the goal being no less than to change the lives of each participant
- A process/structure to utilize the creative capacity of each individual
- A lightning rod for tactile experiences with materials and objects that stimulate new discoveries with unforeseen results
- A learning to "see" (observation) rather than "recognize" (identification)
- Interaction to demonstrate the important difference between originality and discovery
- Substitute familiar patterns with unfamiliar ways of working, the search of new and unpredictable connections

The Educational Process:

- Each faculty member provides an introduction for the process and context of each session. The context could be as simple as a question, an object or could be a social issue that sets the pace of the exploration
- Using their process, they will discuss the context with the participants
- Making begins where the examination and exploration continually expands and contracts the process of seeing.
- The outcome will produce both a perspective on one's own skills and ideas as well as integrate new processes previously unexplored. For example: rhythm and tempo may be incorporated into one's use of typographic styles.

Example Case Study:

“Making to See” at UCLA Extension

What:

To test the ideas of this effort, we decided to launch this study as a one week workshop, bringing together diverse disciplines outside of the field of graphic design, creating a process to activate the aesthetic senses without the need for results or analysis working with a variety of media, materials and talented catalysts from outside of the design profession.

Science will work with architecture and riff with music, looping into the examination of how to juggle - using materials, physical space and philosophical discourse.

Workshop Goal:

The program provides independent exploration for applying classic skills to individual ideas for the artist, designer and their community.

Day themes identified:

- motion
- space
- structure
- language
- matrices
- sound
- light

Expected Outcomes:

We expect that the participants (instructors as well as students) will leave with an excitement for more questions that will demand exploration as part of their livelihood. Our hope is to explore the smallest interstices of a limited number of categories so that the making is not so much product, but discovery. Like a piece of jazz, we start with a loose structure and continue the connections as it develops through short courses, one week workshops and longer periods of sustained exploration as six-eight week programs.

We:

- generate more questions
- create new perspectives
- change processes
- find a new way of working
- replace arrogance with confidence
- stoke curiosity
- see more possibilities
- question assumptions
- open doors
- evaluate
- rethink
- and disseminate

Mark Rothko wrote one of the best explanations of this very human process:

In art, as in biology, there is a phenomenon that can be described as a mutation, in which appearances radically change at a tempo much more rapid than that at which they normally proceed. As in the case of biology, we have no means to determine the process by which this radical change occurs. ... Here art must attain a new start if it is to survive. Then, assiduously, it renews its traditions by marriage with alien traditions, by the re-examination of its own processes, and by those means re-establishes contact again with its own roots. It is in this way that new plastic worlds are born. For art, like a race, cannot inbreed very long without losing its incentives to continue; it needs the rejuvenation of new experiences and new blood. These mutations, it must be clear, however, do not constitute a change in properties, or mean that art has discarded its past. On the contrary, mutation involves a more conscious evaluation of art's inheritance and the redirection of that inheritance into channels where it can be continued with greater force.

FROM THE ARTIST'S REALITY PHILOSOPHIES OF ART BY MARK ROTHKO

There is no single answer to the many complex issues facing design education, but the purpose for this new program will be to explore new paradigms for restoring human creativity to the design process. Having a laboratory for experimentation, while maintaining a thriving traditional design curricula, encourages educational institutions to explore passion with no immediate practical application. We want to create an environment for the university, faculty and students that encourages exploration and expands their frames of reference. Identifying intersections between art, architecture, science, integrative biology, linguistics and philosophy is what I most look forward to with the Institute. We wish to proliferate more questions than answers, with outcomes that exceed any current expectations.